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The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

Child Sexual Abuse

What Is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse occurs when a child is used for the sexual gratification of an older adolescent or adult. It involves the exposure of a child to sexual contact, activity or behaviour, and may include invitation to sexual touching, intercourse or other forms of exploitation, such as juvenile prostitution or pornography.

Child sexual abuse is a criminal offence in Canada. The Criminal Code clearly stipulates what behaviours are criminal and the Canada Evidence Act defines what evidence may be admitted in court.

How Widespread Is the Problem?

As child sexual abuse is largely a hidden crime, its prevalence is difficult to assess. The nature of the problem, its secrecy and shame, the criminal penalties it entails, and the young age and dependency of its victims all serve to lessen voluntary reporting. Research evidence consistently reports that

most children do not disclose their abuse; even when they do, families may be reluctant to seek assistance.

There are no national statistics for child sexual abuse in Canada. Each province compiles its own figures according to its own definitions. In some provinces, suspected cases are combined with confirmed ones, while in others sexual abuse is not distinguished from physical abuse.

The most extensive study of child sexual abuse in Canada was conducted by the Committee on Sexual Offences Against Children and Youth (Badgley, 1984). It claims that:

- Fifty-three percent of females and 31% of males have been victims of one or more unwanted sexual acts.¹
- Approximately four in five of those incidents happened to the victims when they were children or youths.²

- A national population survey done for the Badgley Report found approximately three in four victims to be girls and that one in four to be a boy.³
- Dr. Ken Finkel in an article in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, estimated that 25% of women and 10% of men are sexually abused before the age of 16.⁴
- In Metropolitan Toronto alone it has been estimated that over 2000 children may be sexually abused each year.⁵

Facts to Consider

The Victim

- Victims of child sexual abuse come from all social, ethnic and economic groupings.
- Children are not capable of giving informed consent to sexual activity, since they cannot understand or predict the consequences of adult-child sexual contact.
- Children are more vulnerable to sexual abuse beginning in the preadolescent stage between the ages 8 to 12.⁶
- Children who are isolated from others, with few friends and little contact with brothers and sisters, are at a greater risk of victimization. Some abusers are able to take advantage of a child's isolation, while others manage to isolate the child. Some children may isolate themselves because they feel different or afraid of being stigmatized.
- The closer the social relationship, not necessarily the biological one, between the child and the abuser, the greater the potential trauma to the child. Sexual assault by a trusted neighbour, for example, might be more damaging than abuse by a distant uncle.
- Children find it difficult to break the silence. In a child's world, adults control most of the resources and they seem to know all the answers. If the abuser threatens the child or someone the child loves, the child will seldom question the power of the adult to carry out the threat.

- Children invariably want to tell about their abuse so that it can be stopped, but they are often afraid that they will not be believed or protected, or are afraid of the possible consequences of disclosure.
- Especially in cases of incest, enforced secrecy and a child's fear of destroying the privacy and security of the family are such powerful obstacles to disclosure that children rarely reveal their sexual victimization until they are adults. Many never tell even then.
- There is little evidence that many children deliberately make false allegations or misinterpret appropriate adult-child contact as sexual abuse.⁷
- In the few recorded cases where children have made false allegations, it has almost always been the result of manipulation by an adult.
- False denials of sexual abuse and recanting a disclosure of abuse are much more common than false reports.⁸
- Children sometimes recant truthful allegations of abuse. This is not surprising in the light of the imbalance of power between the offending adult and the child.
- A recent study of child victims as courtroom witnesses noted that children's statements are, in general, coherent and that they accurately reflect the time and causes of the event.⁹
- Sexual abuse can have long-term adverse consequences. A study done in Toronto on adolescent runaways found that 75% of the females and 38% of males had been sexually abused as children.¹⁰
- Adult women sexually molested as children are more likely than non-victims to manifest depression, self-destructive behaviour, anxiety, feelings of isolation and stigma, poor self-esteem, a tendency toward revictimization and substance abuse.¹¹

The Abuser

- Most offenders are not strangers. Studies reveal that in nine out of ten cases the perpetrator is either related or known to the victim.¹²
- More than 90% of the reported abusers are male.¹³
- All the research into child sexual abuse indicates that it is the offender who initiates the sexual activity. The responsibility for the abuse rests with the offender.
- Offenders use a number of strategies to gain access to children and to enforce their victim's silence, including threats, force, bribery, acts of cruelty, and other forms of physical and psychological coercion.
- Incest offenders are similar to the non-offending population with respect to level of education, religion, occupation, intelligence or mental status. Abusers are found among all ages, economic groups and social classes.¹⁴
- Most sexual abuse takes place in the context of an ongoing relationship between the abuser and the child. This affords the offender an opportunity to exploit the child's wants and fears. An incestuous father, for example, may give his daughter special privileges or presents to have her remain silent.

Reporting Child Sexual Abuse

Anyone who has reasonable grounds to believe that a child is being sexually exploited or abused should immediately report these concerns to the child welfare agency, provincial social services department or police force in the community. In all cases, the person reporting is protected from any kind of legal action, provided the report is not made out of malice.

Where to Go for Support Services

Contact your local:

- child welfare agency
- police department
- hospital

- social service agency
- mental health centre
- sexual assault centre
- transition home
- distress centre
- or other community service organizations that provide counselling to children and families.

Many of these organizations are listed among the emergency telephone numbers on the first page of your local telephone directory.

What Can Be Done to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse?

- Lawyers, psychologists, doctors, social workers, police and other professionals who provide assistance to the victims of child sexual abuse should receive specialized training.
- Children can best be protected by giving them the knowledge and skills necessary for their safety and well-being, and by creating an atmosphere in our communities where they feel safe enough to come forward if they are being mistreated or abused.
- Children who are well informed about inappropriate touching, who are taught to trust their feelings about situations and people, and who know where to get help if they require it are less likely to be victimized by any type of assault.
- Prevention education is of particular importance for children who have been sexually abused, as they are at a higher risk of revictimization than are children who have not been sexually assaulted.

Suggested Reading

For Children

- *A Better Safe than Sorry Book: A Family Guide For Sexual Assault Prevention*, by Sol and Judith Gordon. New York: Ed-U Press, Inc., 1986.

- *Am I The Only One? A Young People's Book About Sex Abuse*, by Dennis Foon and Brenda Knight, Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre Publishers, 1985.
- *No More Secrets For Me*, by Oralle Watcher, Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown & Co., 1986.
- *The Secret of the Silver Horse*. Ottawa: Department of Justice, 1989.
- *The Silent Scream: The Sexual Abuse of Children*, by Linda Halliday. Toronto: University of Toronto, Guidance Centre, Faculty of Education, 1985.
- 7. Jon R. Conte, *A Look at Child Sexual Abuse* (National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse, 1986), p. 13.
- 8. *Child Abuse Prevention* (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, 1987), p. 10.
- 9. John C. Yuille, Mary Ann King and Don MacDougall, *Child Victims and Witnesses: The Social Sciences and Legal Literatures* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1988), p. 21.
- 10. Mark-David Janus, Arlene McCormack, Ann Wolbert Burgess, and Carol Hartman, *Adolescent Runaways: Causes and Consequences* (Toronto: D.C. Heath & Co., 1987), p. 57.
- 11. Angela Browne and David Finkelhor, *Impact of Child Sexual Abuse: A Review of Research* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1989), p. 12.
- 12. Diana E.H. Russell, *The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1986), p. 219.
- 13. Robert Dubé et al., *Child Sexual Abuse Prevention in Canada: A Guide to Prevention Programs and Resources* (Montréal: Hôpital Sainte-Justine, 1988), p. 9.
- 14. A. Nicholas Groth, in *Handbook Of Clinical Intervention in Child Sexual Abuse*, Suzanne M. Sgroi, ed. (Toronto: D.C. Heath and Co., 1982), p. 215.

For Adults

- *A Safety and First Aid Manual for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Sexual Abuse*, by Carla Van Dam. Campbell River, B.C.: M.D. Angus and Associates Ltd., 1987.
- *Child Sexual Abuse Prevention in Canada: A Guide to Prevention Programs and Resources*, by Robert Dubé et al. Montréal: Hôpital Sainte-Justine, 1988.
- *Protecting Your Children from Sexual Assault: Little Ones' Parents' Teaching Guide*, by William Katz. Toronto: Little Ones Books, 1983.
- *What to Do if a Child Tells You of Sexual Abuse: Understanding the Law*. Ottawa: Department of Justice, 1988.

Audio-visual: The Family Violence Prevention Division of Health and Welfare Canada has compiled over 50 films and videos on family violence, which can be borrowed free of charge through the regional offices of the National Film Board.

Endnotes

1. Robin Badgley et al., *Sexual Offences Against Children* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1984), p. 180.
2. Ibid, p. 175.
3. Ibid, p. 198.
4. Ken Finkel, *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, Feb. 1, 1987, p. 245.
5. Linda Reid, *The Abused Child, A Shared Responsibility: A Handbook for Youth and Recreation Personnel* (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, 1985), p. 6.
6. David Finkelhor, *A Sourcebook on Child Sexual Abuse* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1986), p. 64.

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For further information on child sexual abuse or on other family violence issues, contact:

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